

Psychopomp

Psychopomps (from the Greek word ψυχοπομπός, *psychopompós*, literally meaning the 'guide of souls')^[1] are creatures, spirits, angels, or deities in many religions whose responsibility is to escort newly deceased souls from Earth to the afterlife. Their role is not to judge the deceased, but simply to guide them. Appearing frequently on funerary art, psychopomps have been depicted at different times and in different cultures as anthropomorphic entities, horses, deer, dogs, whip-poor-wills, ravens, crows, vultures, owls, sparrows, and cuckoos. When seen as birds, they are often seen in huge masses, waiting outside the home of the dying.

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Relief from a carved funerary *lekythos* at Athens: Hermes as psychopomp conducts the deceased, *Myrrhine*, a priestess of Athena, to Hades, c. 430–420 BC (National Archaeological Museum of Athens).

Overview

Ancient religion

Classical examples of a psychopomp are the ancient Egyptian god Anubis, the deity Yama in Hinduism, the Greek ferryman Charon^[1] and god Hermes, the Roman god Mercury, the Norse Valkyries, the Aztec Xolotl, Slavic Morana and the Etruscan Vanth.

Modern religion

Heibai Wuchang, literally "Black and White Impermanence", are two Deities in Chinese folk religion in charge of escorting the spirits of the dead to the underworld.

The form of Shiva as Tarakeshwara in Hinduism performs a similar role, although leading the soul to moksha rather than an afterlife. Additionally, in the Bhagavata Purana, the Visnudutas and Yamadutas are also messengers for their respective masters, Vishnu and Yama. Their role is illustrated vividly in the story of Ajamila. In many beliefs, a spirit being taken to the underworld is violently ripped from its body.^[2]

In the Persian tradition, Daena, the Zoroastrian self-guide, appears as a beautiful young maiden to those who deserve to cross the Chinvat Bridge or a hideous old hag to those who do not.^[3]

In Islam, Azrael plays the role of the angel of death who carries the soul up to the heavens. However, he only acts by the permission of God.^[4]

The polytheistic concept of a specific deity of death is rejected by Judaistic monotheism because only God is regarded the master of death and of life.^[5] However a Jewish Psychopomp is an archangel Samael whose role in Talmudic and post-Talmudic lore is both as Angel of death and accuser.

In many cultures, the shaman also fulfils the role of the psychopomp. This may include not only accompanying the soul of the dead, but also to help at birth, to introduce the newborn child's soul to the world.^{[6]:36} This also accounts for the contemporary title of "midwife to the dying" or "End of Life Doula", which is another form of psychopomp work.

In Filipino culture, ancestral spirits (*anito*) function as psychopomps. When the dying call out to specific dead persons (e.g. parents, partners), the spirits of the latter are supposedly visible to the former. The spirits, who traditionally wait at the foot of the deathbed, retrieve (Tagalog: *sundô*) the soul soon after death and escort it into the afterlife.^[7]

In Christianity, Saint Peter, Michael the Archangel and Jesus are thought of as psychopomps either as leading the dead to heaven or, as in the case of Peter, allowing them through the gates.^[8]

Psychology

In Jungian psychology, the psychopomp is a mediator between the unconscious and conscious realms. It is symbolically personified in dreams as a wise man or woman, or sometimes as a helpful animal.^[9]

Popular culture

The most common modern psychopomp appearing in popular culture is the Grim Reaper, which dates from 15th-century England and has been adopted into many other cultures around the world over the years; for instance, the shinigami in Japanese culture today,^[a] or Santa Muerte in Mexico.

In Hans Christian Andersen's 1845 tale *The Little Match Girl*, a girl dying of hypothermia has a vision of her grandmother, who later carries her soul to heaven.

In HP Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror", whippoorwills are considered psychopomps by the Dunwich locals, believing that the birds attempt to catch souls as they leave a dying body.

In the 1989 Stephen King novel *The Dark Half* and the 1993 film of the same name based on the novel, sparrows are depicted as a type of psychopomp.

In both the BBC TV drama series *Life on Mars* and *Ashes to Ashes* the character of DCI Gene Hunt is a psychopomp for dead and dying police officers. This is not revealed until the final episode of the last series of *Ashes to Ashes*.

In both the comic book series and 1994 film series The Crow, several crows are depicted as psychopomps that carry the souls of the dead to the afterlife and guide them back to the mortal world to exact revenge on the people who killed them.

In the Black Panther movie from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the Panther Goddess Bast is depicted as a psychopomp who guides Bashenga, the first Black Panther, to the Heart-Shaped Herb which bestows him and his descendants their powers.

See also

- Life replacement narratives, Korean myths in which psychopomps are persuaded into sparing a person's life

Notes

- Exemplified by the popular manga and TV anime series Death Note

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Further reading

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External links

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